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GENERAL DISCUSSION ON PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21, FOCUSING ON THE CROSS-SECTORAL COMPONENTS OF AGENDA 21 AND THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Role and contribution of major groups

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report is an abbreviated summary of the main report on major groups which is being made available as a background document. The analysis in the main report is based primarily on the written submissions received from 41 major group organizations, 20 Governments and 17 United Nations and non-United Nations intergovernmental organizations on the role and contribution of major groups in the follow-up to Agenda 21, 1/ particularly in the period 1994-1995.

The main report contains five sections: an introduction, a general overview, a section on trends in major group participation in sustainable development, a section on financial matters, and conclusions and proposals for future action. The section on trends in major group participation focuses more specifically on the extent of participation, the methods that have increased participation and the difficulties and obstacles that remain. The main report mentions some positive trends as well as many obstacles observed in the non-governmental, governmental and intergovernmental spheres.

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The analysis indicates that there has been a slight increase in major group participation; a growing focus on partnerships among the major group sectors; and a continuing focus on formulating guidelines, frameworks and other strategic approaches. Country information indicates that there have been some positive steps regarding major group participation in such areas as the national Agenda 21 coordination mechanisms. The intergovernmental sphere has shown a great deal of support for participation of major groups in the various regular and conference-related meetings; continuing support for training, information dissemination and research collaboration activities; and some support for participation in policy-making and project design.

The main report provides examples to illustrate these and other trends observed. A number of proposals for future action are also made aimed at encouraging the positive trends while taking steps to overcome the many remaining obstacles and difficulties.

SUMMARY

1. The secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development received written submissions from 41 major group organizations, 20 Governments and 17 United Nations and non-United Nations intergovernmental organizations on the role and contribution of major groups in the follow-up to Agenda 21, 1/ particularly in the period 1994-1995. A full analysis of this information is in the background paper on the role and contribution of major groups. Country information indicated that there were some positive steps regarding major group participation in such areas as the national Agenda 21 coordination mechanisms. The intergovernmental sphere showed a great deal of support for participation of major groups in the various regular and conference-related meetings; continuing support for training, information dissemination and research collaboration activities; and some support for participation in policy-making and project design. The background paper provides more detail, including illustrative examples of the main trends observed in the role and contribution of major groups in the monitoring and implementation of Agenda 21. On the basis of the analysis, the following conclusions and proposals for future action are made.

A. Conclusions

2. Enabling partnerships with major groups are one of the few guarantees that Agenda 21 possesses for its successful implementation. Major groups, Governments and intergovernmental organizations have been undertaking numerous positive efforts in this direction in the period 1994-1995. There has been a relative increase in the overall interest and participation of major groups in Agenda 21 follow-up processes as compared with the previous years. There is also an overall trend among Governments and international organizations to include multiple sectors of major groups in the efforts to identify problems. Thus, it might be argued that the political and practical significance of the major groups concept has, to some degree, influenced the way individuals, organizations and institutions at all levels are looking at the economic and social challenges that are before humanity.

3. However, it is also important to stress that the existence of numerous activities, programmes and projects at the national and international levels does not necessarily mean that the problems are solved. In fact, the positive examples summarized in the present report reflect the experiences of relatively few major groups - few when compared with the full spectrum of major group organizations around the world. Similarly, national information that was available for this report was limited. Twenty countries from among 185 States Members of the United Nations provided information relevant to the role and participation of major groups.

B. Proposals for action

4. The most important level of participation in Agenda 21 implementation and monitoring is at the national level, particularly through national coordinating mechanisms such as the national councils on sustainable development. Major

group participation in such mechanisms needs to be further encouraged, strengthened and expanded to cover representation by all the major group sectors. In this context, the Commission might wish to:

(a) Note the efforts of those countries that have supported major group participation in the national coordinating mechanisms and urge others to do the same;

(b) Recommend that both the existing and the to-be-established national coordination mechanisms should strive to achieve the representation of all major group sectors in their composition;

(c) Suggest that in establishing these mechanisms, the national and local major groups organizations should be allowed to play a role in choosing their own representatives.

5. Participation in the inter-sessional activities of the Commission is proving increasingly to be productive in nature, especially when these activities involve major groups. It is important to note also that a number of such meetings during the period 1994-1995 were organized by major groups and involved representatives from governmental and intergovernmental institutions. In this context, the Commission might wish to:

(a) Recognize the efforts of Governments and United Nations organizations as well as major groups that have increased major group involvement in the inter-sessional meetings;

(b) Urge all concerned to continue and expand the involvement of major groups in the inter-sessional events so as to enable a multiplier effect in terms of the diversity of major group sectors and organizations that are invited;

(c) Encourage and urge further partnerships among Governments, intergovernmental organizations and the major groups in organizing future inter-sessional activities.

6. A continuing concern of major groups is lack of transparency with regard to the selection criteria used in choosing major group representatives to participate in the various coordination and consultation mechanisms at the national and international levels. The Commission might wish to request that such criteria be made available to major groups through various information dissemination methods including electronic systems.

7. An emerging positive practice is to include major group representatives in the national delegations to the Commission and other related international processes. The Commission might wish to welcome this practice and recommend that it be further encouraged so as to become a standard one for all member Governments.

8. Funding to enable major group participation in the sessions of the Commission, and its inter-sessional activities, as well as in the other meetings relevant to Agenda 21 follow-up is one of the most pressing needs, particularly

in the case of major group organizations from developing countries and countries in transition and of specific groups such as children and youth, indigenous people and farmers. In this context, the Commission might wish to:

(a) Request that donor countries and United Nations organizations as well as non-United Nations international and regional intergovernmental organizations aim at increasing funding in this area;

(b) Explore the possibilities for creating a special multilateral trust fund to respond to this urgent need;

(c) Recommend that Governments and United Nations organizations support the relevant initiatives of major groups, such as the efforts of Northern non-governmental organizations to raise funds through their Governments to enable travel of Southern colleagues for the purpose of attending the sessions of the Commission or related meetings.

9. A number of funding sources relevant to major group participation in sustainable development exist. However, there appears to be confusion among many major groups, particularly those in the developing countries, regarding the application procedures and lack of information on the funds available. The Commission might wish to request a survey of the existing funding sources, to be presented to the Commission at its session in 1996.

10. Regular exchange and dissemination of information among major groups and intergovernmental and governmental organizations are essential to strengthening the role and contribution of major groups to sustainable development. This also increases the level of transparency in all relevant activities and the accountability of actors. In this context, the Commission might wish to note the positive contributions in this area made both by its secretariat (through CSD Update), and by inter-agency programmes such as the Non-Governmental Liaison Service (through E&D File and Go Between), as well as by non-governmental organizations such as the Centre for Our Common Future (through The Network and The Bulletin), and to encourage donor countries and institutions to support and enhance such efforts at the national, regional and international levels.

11. Electronic networks, if and when they are available and easily accessible, provide an effective platform for exchanging information, alerting communities and mobilizing them for joint action with partners continents away. Increasing the access of major groups to such networks at all levels is likely to improve the quality and quantity of major group consultations in sustainable development and in other areas of social and economic significance. The Commission might wish to:

(a) Request that Governments and international organizations, in collaboration with major groups such as business and industry and the academic communities, explore how the availability of and access to such electronic systems can be increased so as to benefit major groups, especially in developing countries;

(b) Urge all concerned to seek and enable appropriate public-private partnerships;

(c) Request United Nations organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to give special attention to ways to increase major group access to electronic networks.

12. The role and contribution of major groups in Agenda 21 implementation and monitoring will be part of the eventual review of Agenda 21. The Commission might wish to consider holding "public hearings" or similar direct methods of dialogue, during one of its forthcoming sessions so as to allow major groups to voice their views first hand in dialogue with the members of the Commission. Such efforts could be supplemented by similar regional processes, perhaps carried out in conjunction with the regional commissions.

13. While the number and substance of inputs from major groups have increased, there needs to be further discussion and coordination regarding how to ensure that these contributions are reflected in the thematic reports. The Commission might wish to request the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development to elaborate on the subject of how greater inter-agency coordination in this area could be achieved, including the possibility of coordination through the existing non-governmental organizations/major group focal points within the various international organizations.

14. A difficulty noted by some United Nations bodies and many major group organizations relates to the uneven nature of the procedures for access to various bodies including applications for formal status. The Commission might wish to consider requesting a study to examine the existing procedures of access. Such a study could be utilized to produce practical tools, such as handbooks, for use by major groups.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.